

THE CASE OF

**Bertrand Russell**

*versus*

**Democracy and Education**

*By* ALBERT C. BARNES

*Published by*

ALBERT C. BARNES

MERION, PA.



# THE CASE OF Bertrand Russell vs. Democracy and Education

by  
ALBERT C. BARNES

---

Two years ago the newspapers of three continents informed their readers that Bertrand Russell had been ousted from a highly paid job and named me as the person responsible. More recently the same papers reported that Mr. Russell had won his suit for alleged breach of contract. *What they have not reported is that we were never given an opportunity to present in Court the circumstances which led to Mr. Russell's dismissal.* The purpose of this pamphlet is to put on record publicly the facts responsible for a serious break in the most vital strands in the fabric of American life.

My own connection with Mr. Russell's career began in 1940. In February of that year he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the College of the City of New York, and a bitter public outcry immediately arose that Mr. Russell was morally unfit to teach, that his appointment was a civic outrage. On March 30, Justice John E. McGeehan, of the Supreme Court of New York, voided the appointment, chiefly on the ground that Mr. Russell was an open advocate of immorality. Largely through political chicanery, Mr. Russell was *denied the right of his day in Court*. Convinced that this constituted a flagrant violation of the Bill of Rights, John Dewey and eight other scholars representing the Com-

mittee for Cultural Freedom prepared an account of the facts and the law involved, which appeared in a book entitled "The Bertrand Russell Case." To this I contributed a Foreword; also the cost of publication.

In this Foreword I wrote:

"The book is simply the record of an inquiry into the *facts* of the case—an inquiry conducted by specialists qualified to examine its manifold aspects and to relate their findings to the principles of justice, law, humanity, and common decency, as these are set forth in the Constitution of the United States and in the Bill of Rights."

*This Foreword, as quoted, is equally applicable to the present case; and the recital which follows is prompted by the same concern for justice and a full airing of the facts that prompted the book in question when Mr. Russell was the victim.*

The plight of Mr. Russell, deprived by Justice McGeehan's decision of the constitutional right to a fair trial, came at a moment when the Barnes Foundation had decided to supplement its courses in the appreciation of art by a systematic course in the historical and cultural conditions under which the traditions of art developed. Mr. Russell's early training in philosophy, his knowledge of the history of ideas, and his gifts of exposition seemed adequate qualification for the position to be filled. Though I knew of Mr. Russell's propensity for getting himself embroiled with established law and order, and was aware that after brief engagements at Harvard, Chicago, and the University of California he had been permanently retained nowhere, I decided to take the risk of recommending him for the position at the Barnes Foundation. My friend, Professor Dewey, wrote to Mr. Russell to inquire whether he would be interested and, upon his receiving a favorable reply, I went to California to discuss the matter with Mr. Russell himself.

I explained fully to Mr. Russell that for more than twenty years we had been conducting a plan of adult education,



putting into practice, by means of scientific method, the conceptions propounded in Dewey's classic volume, "Democracy and Education"; I told him that we employed the same method, not of authority handed down from above but of free discussion, in which staff and students participated by pooling their knowledge and endeavoring to achieve a genuinely shared experience. I told him that at a weekly staff meeting the teachers discussed problems presented by their students; that applicants for classes had to be approved by the Board of Trustees, and that those selected were required to attend classes regularly and were expelled if their behavior interfered with the rights of any other student.

Having thus put before Mr. Russell the program of the Foundation and the functions of its teachers, I asked if he approved and if he wished to become a member of the staff. He replied emphatically that he did approve and that it would be "a pleasure, a privilege and an honor" to be identified with the program. The plan outlined to coordinate Mr. Russell's course with those already in operation at the Foundation would take five years to complete, including preparation of a book embodying Mr. Russell's lectures. He asked for a contract to cover the entire five-year period and we agreed upon six thousand dollars as yearly salary. Four days after a contract embodying these terms was executed, Mr. Russell wrote me: "You have made the most enormous difference to my peace of mind and power of work—more than I can possibly express."

About a month later, Mr. Russell called at my office and told me that he would be compelled to abandon popular lecturing if he were to do his work for us properly, but that the sacrifice of income involved would present him with a serious financial problem. When I asked him exactly what the amount of the sacrifice would be, he told me that it would be two thousand dollars a year, and added that he was sick and tired of popular lecturing and wished to devote all his energies to serious work. Upon my further inquiry

whether he meant that if I could arrange for an increase in his salary from six to eight thousand dollars he would agree to discontinue all popular lectures and give the time thus saved to work for the Foundation, he eagerly assented, reserving only the right to deliver, "a very occasional lecture to some university audience." On this basis, his salary was increased to \$8,000.00 per year. Four weeks later he wrote me, "I look forward to a quiet life without popular lecturing, which I hate."

In my conversation with Mr. Russell in California, I had particularly emphasized the fact that our educational program was a joint enterprise, involving participation by all the members of our staff as well as our students. Accordingly, I arranged for a meeting of Mr. Russell and our other teachers at the earliest possible moment after he assumed his duties. The result of this meeting was completely barren: Mr. Russell showed not the slightest interest in what the other teachers were doing, or desire to acquaint them with his plans for his own course, or the purposes he intended to carry out in it. He evidently had no conception of what was implied in a cooperative undertaking and no desire to find out. This was our first intimation of the shape of things to come.

During the first five months of his stay at the Foundation, Mr. Russell lectured for the most part extemporaneously, with reference to his manuscript chiefly for topics or to quote *verbatim*. He was fluent, vivacious and witty, and the students were attentive and interested; on the other hand, he never attempted to relate the content of his lectures to the students' interest in art, and certainly not in the slightest degree to what they learned in our other courses. He lectured only once every week, from October 1 to May 31 each year. He was in the habit of entering the building just in time for the start of his one-hour lecture at quarter after two, devoting never more than fifteen minutes to answering questions after the class, and then leaving the building

immediately. Never did he mingle with the students on informal terms or encourage those who were shy to ask him questions in individual conversation, or seek to discover angles of approach that they might find interesting or enlightening.

In one of his lectures, when a question of morals was raised, Mr. Russell roundly asserted that issues involving ultimate moral or social values could not be settled by the use of scientific method, but only by a "bash on the head"—by violence or terror. Nothing better illustrates Mr. Russell's substitute for scientific method than his procedure whenever a question relating to religion or morals came up for discussion. When, for example, he discussed the Jewish rituals, it was in a tone of ridicule and derision; and on one occasion he related with great gusto a story about an anonymous book, the thesis of which was that "the three greatest impostors in history were Moses, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus Christ." Mr. Russell added, gleefully, that since the author of the book is not known, "I would now like to put in my claim for its authorship."

In one of his books, Mr. Russell refers to a type of condescension "which delicately impresses inferiors with a sense of their own crudity." It was this manner of condescension which served as Mr. Russell's "bash on the head" to intimidate and reduce to silence anyone who might be disposed to submit his opinions to discussion. By it he established a reign of terror which isolated him from his students as effectively as he had already isolated himself from his colleagues.

Almost immediately upon Mr. Russell's arrival in Philadelphia, and before he assumed his duties at the Foundation, it became apparent that there was a disturbing factor in the situation of which we had had no previous inkling. This factor was Mr. Russell's wife. At the outset she made it known to us that she is "Lady Russell." Her demeanor contained more than a suggestion of imperiousness, and her



manner with the members of the staff made it apparent that she expected to exercise distinctly unusual prerogatives. She arrogated to herself the right to attend classes without complying with the usual formalities, and at whatever time suited her own convenience. On one occasion she burst into the building and created a scene by a loud and imperious command to one of the members of the Board of Trustees. This tantrum was one of a series of disturbing events which began soon after Mr. Russell's course started and recurred frequently.

A rising tide of complaint from members of the class testified that the normal management of the Foundation's affairs was being disrupted by her disorderly conduct—to put it mildly. A written report given to Mr. Russell called his attention to recorded details of this impossible situation and its lamentable incongruity with an educational program designed to embody equal rights for all. His reply was that he had not shown the complaint to his wife and that he hoped the matter would go no further—a reply which gave the impression that fear of his wife's reaction to the complaint deterred him from informing her about it, and that no remedial action could be expected from him.

Several months later, Mrs. Russell's continued defiance of law and order necessitated official action by the Board of Trustees. She was informed that—"The Foundation has never been a place where people may drop in occasionally, at their own volition, nor is any person whosoever allowed to do things that interfere with the rights of others or are harmful to the Foundation's interests."

Her reply to this was a tirade composed of arrogance, rage and self-pity. Mr. Russell's contribution to the incident was a curt and incisive note in support of his wife. The correspondence closed with a reminder to Mr. Russell that "when we engaged you to teach, we did not obligate ourselves to endure forever the trouble-making propensities of your wife." The question thus forced upon us was to settle



whether autocracy or democracy was to prevail in the conduct of the Foundation's affairs. It was settled by a formal notice to Mrs. Russell to stay away from the Foundation.

With this dismissal of his wife, a steady deterioration in the quality of Mr. Russell's lectures set in. His manner in the classroom lost its animation and grew perfunctory, even apathetic. More and more he merely read from his manuscript, and more and more what he read consisted of matter accessible to all in standard works of reference. Often he spoke so fast that a skilled stenographer could not take accurate notes of what he said. During the discussion period after the class he was increasingly disposed to answer questions with a chuckle, a wisecrack, or a reply which subjected the questioner to ridicule.

The result showed quickly in the attendance figures, and became constantly more unmistakable. Absences multiplied; more and more members withdrew entirely from the class; it was the better students who went, the poorer who stayed. By December of 1942, of the sixty selected students originally admitted, only eleven were left.

Shortly after the beginning of the second year of his course, a fresh development came to light which compelled us to review the whole situation of which Mr. Russell was a part. It will be remembered that a few weeks after Mr. Russell was engaged and the amount of his salary fixed, his annual salary was increased by two thousand dollars, in consideration of which he was to discontinue popular lecturing after April 1, 1941, when a contract for popular lectures expired. Now we learned that at a time subsequent to that date Mr. Russell had gone back to popular lecturing; not to giving, in the terms he had used in his letter to me, "a very occasional lecture to some university audience," but to widespread popular lecturing even though, after his salary had been increased, he had written me, "I look forward to a quiet life, without popular lecturing, which I hate."

With this gross breach of contract in mind, we began to

consider the question of his dismissal from the staff, but delayed action for several months while we submitted the entire evidence to a group of distinguished authorities in ethics and law. The legal experts' opinion was that he had broken his contract by popular lecturing and by his upholding of Mrs. Russell's disorderly conduct. The ethical support of the legal opinion was based upon Mr. Russell's performance as a member of the Foundation's teaching staff; that is, he never made any efforts to bring what he was doing into fruitful relationship with the work of his colleagues; his lectures appeared to be a task for him and had been a dreary ordeal for those who had abandoned the class; he had made not a single contribution to the solution of problems confronting the rest of the teaching staff or to the organization as a whole. Never, in short, did Mr. Russell in any manner or degree identify himself with the Foundation's program of democracy in education. His appearance for one hour and fifteen minutes, once a week, for which he received two hundred and fifty dollars each time, amounted to punching a time clock in order to obtain an inordinately large paycheck. Finally, in December, 1942, we decided that the farce could go on no longer and he was dismissed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The foregoing recital sets forth the circumstances under which Bertrand Russell joined the staff of the Barnes Foundation, the conditions to which he agreed at the outset, and the failure on his part to live up to those conditions which resulted in his dismissal. A brief summary now of the aims and methods of the Foundation's educational program will reveal the conflict between Mr. Russell's autocratic and authoritarian attitude toward life and the democratic and scientific attitude on which the Foundation's program has always been based.

The account of this program which follows consists of a simplified statement of the fundamentals of the philosophy of John Dewey as applied to education. This system rests on the axiom that the indispensable elements of the democratic way of life—scientific method as intelligence in operation, art, education—are all bound together in a single organic whole. To put the matter in other terms, all genuine experience is intelligent experience, experience guided by insight derived from science, illuminated by art, and made a common possession through education. This conception has implications of the most far-reaching import. When the common experience which ought to be the birthright of all human beings is broken by barriers of ignorance, class-prejudice, or economic status, the individual thus isolated loses his status as a civilized human being, and the restoration of his wholeness is possible only by reestablishment of the broken linkage.

Applied to the field of education, this conception implies that the prevailing academic methods of instruction in art are misdirected from the very beginning. What the student needs to know is not how men of genius produced immortal masterpieces long ago, but how in the world that his own eyes show him he can discover more and more of what lends color and zest to what he does from day to day. The masterpieces have their indispensable function, but it is the function of guiding and training the student's own perception, not of standing in remote isolation as objects of worship or occasions for gush.

The misconception which identifies art with what is remote, high-flown or artificial is paralleled by another which confines science to the laboratory or lecture-hall. If the chemist is thought of as operating exclusively with balances and test-tubes, the astronomer as helpless without a telescope, or the historian as a reader of volumes or manuscripts in a library, the essential factor of scientific procedure is lost sight of. Science is science not because laboratory apparatus



or words of a technical vocabulary are employed, but because observation and reflection are joined and correlated by methods that have proved themselves to be illuminating and fruitful. The problems with which science is concerned originate outside the laboratory—in the fields which must be tilled, the swamps that must be drained, the epidemics that must be controlled, the refractory human beings whose acts and purposes must be harmonized for the sake of a good social order. As the problems crystallize, possible solutions take form in the realm of hypothesis, and it is in the laboratory that these receive their first experimental test; but the testing is never complete until the course of reflection has flowed out into the world again, and human activities there have been given a wider scope and a richer meaning.

Education is growth, the development of the faculties with which every normal child is born. Growth is gradual, fostered only by means of communication between the individual and his world. Education provides an orderly progression of the means by which the avenues of communication are gradually widened in scope. It is a never-ending process that extends from the cradle to the grave. "Gradual" means a succession of steps or stages. If the learner attempts to vault over the stages through which natural growth inevitably proceeds, the result is pretense or self-deception, sham erudition masquerading as "culture." It is a view only too widely prevalent that what is "common" is commonplace, and hence contemptible; that distinction consists in avoiding and despising the common; and this is the view that inevitably leads in practice to the gentility which is only another name for vulgarity. In contrast, any work which proceeds from real living has its own integrity and dignity and whether it succeeds or fails never sinks into the meretricious or tawdry.

The interconnection of science and art becomes more fully apparent when we consider them both as means of communication, as indispensables in all educational movements. Born, as we all are, helpless and speechless and



dependent upon others for all the necessities of life, we must acquire slowly and gradually the capacities which make life more than a sum of vegetative and animal processes. As the utterly self-centered and uncomprehending infant develops, the chaos which is his world begins to take on order and to mirror the objective world which lies about him. He learns to relate his cries, wails and random movements to what the things, and especially the persons, in his environment *do* to him. At some point in his growth he grasps the difference between things, which simply affect him, and persons who communicate with him. Throughout the rest of his life he elaborates the distinction. He learns that he must not treat persons as things: this is the dawn of morality. He learns that a more penetrating, a more comprehensive grasp of things enables him to do with them what he could never do by his untutored impulses: this is the dawn of science. He learns, for example, that with particular tones of his voice, gestures, combinations of words, he can make others aware of what he sees with his mind's eye: this is the dawn of art.

Morality, science, art, all alike, are forms of communication, possible only through the sharing of experience which constitutes civilized living. In its widest sense, education includes all of them; but only if education is conceived, not in the conventional sense, as preparation for life, but as living itself. To have conceived education thus, and to have developed the conception until it covers the whole field of human experience, has been the supreme achievement of John Dewey—an achievement rarely paralleled in scope in the entire history of education.

\* \* \* \* \*

The foregoing consideration makes it possible to state briefly the case against Bertrand Russell. If education is

designed to enrich the experience of the student by making him an active participant in the widest and deepest experiences which art, science, and civilization have developed, then Bertrand Russell contributed little or nothing to the education of his class. The reason for his failure was that he himself had no conception of democracy as a sharing in significant experience. The history of ideas about which he lectured was a history of abstractions torn from their human context, with not the slightest recognition of the concreteness of experience throughout all its history. In the religious and moral history of the past Mr. Russell could see mainly an occasion for derision and contempt. Above all, he felt so little share in the desire of his students to relate the things he was talking about to their own experience, that the fear of his ridicule froze on their lips the questions that they would have liked to ask. If they learned anything whatever of democracy in education from him, it was because he presented them with the perfect example of its antithesis.

Published by  
Albert C. Barnes  
Merion, Pa.



